

Policy paper

A new specialist narrative

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Confederation
of School Trusts

The voice of school trusts

Introduction

The special schools system has been consistently treated as distinct from the education system – frequently overlooking alternative provision entirely – and failing to recognise the vital role both play in providing specialist provision within one system. A reductionist narrative prevails, focused on cost, ‘adversarial’ relationships between commissioners, providers, and families, and with little recognition of the social value gained by supporting our most vulnerable children through specialist provision. This must change.

Specialist provision is not an expensive indulgence, but an essential public asset. If we are serious about an inclusive education system, we must stop marginalising the settings that support those whose needs cannot currently be met in mainstream, ensuring that their success, and the success of those who attend them, is central to the reform of the education system. This new narrative helps reframe how specialist provision is recognised. Developed in consultation with CST members that run special schools and alternative provision settings, it reflects a shared ambition: to articulate a confident, collective voice that positions this part of the sector not as a fiscal pressure, but as critical social foundation for inclusion, impact, and innovation for our most vulnerable children.



The narrative

1. A new definition

The language we use shapes the decisions we make. The current framing of Special Educational Needs and Disability and alternative provision is too broad and too imprecise. It conceals the diversity of provision and dilutes the distinct expertise across the system. This language must evolve. We propose a formal shift to the term “specialist” – a cohesive definition that includes special schools and alternative provision. Specialist provision is not separate from the education system but central to it. It is a vital public asset that delivers inclusion through expertise. This reframing moves us beyond the binary of mainstream and ‘other’. It ensures policy and funding recognise the full value of diverse, specialist settings working together.

2. Reframe value from cost pressure to social investment

System wide inclusion is not achieved by suppressing demand or cutting cost, but by investing in what works, for those who need it, when they need it, and where they need it. The current framing of specialist provision as a drain on public finances fails to consider the long-term value that is delivered. Specialist provision is driven by expertise which enables children and young people to make progress in ways that matter: academically, socially, emotionally, and in preparation for adulthood. When we invest in personalised educational pathways through expert provision, we create better outcomes for individuals and greater value for society.

3. Define outcomes with dignity

Specialist providers are educators first and foremost, delivering high-quality teaching that secures excellent educational outcomes. Outcomes in specialist settings should be holistic, encompassing emotional wellbeing, personal agency, social connection, and safety, alongside academic and vocational measures. These are not secondary or compensatory aims, but essential to enabling young people to lead fulfilling lives. Success must be recognised in all its forms, with dignity and ambition at the centre.

4. Tell a better story: Shift the public and political narrative

The dominant narrative around the specialist sector is often deficit-based, adversarial, and reductionist. This obscures the impact of inclusive, expert practice and distorts decision-making. We – the sector, policy makers, society – must embrace a new narrative that celebrates specialist provision as key to equity and ambition for all children in society. A sector whose expertise is integral to strengthening inclusivity across the system.

5. Invest in outreach and early intervention as infrastructure

Specialist provision is rich with expertise, but outreach across the system should not rely on unpredictable funding or moral commitment alone. It must be systemised, resourced, impact evaluated, and embedded into the wider education system. The commonality of need can then be identified and programmes of workforce development built around that strategically. Outreach



should not be about emergency intervention, but systematically building inclusive cultures and addressing need before crisis occurs.

6. Build institutional memory and trusted relationships

Frequent turnover in central and local government weakens strategy and undermines trust. Longstanding school leaders report having to re-make the same case year after year. National policy must prioritise continuity and long-term strategic engagement with the specialist sector, not rely on 'after the event' responses to policy shaped by the needs of the wider education system.

7. Maximise social impact and collective endeavour

Specialist provision's impact extends beyond individual outcomes, strengthening communities, and supporting a fairer, more inclusive society. To maximise this impact, we must invest in the conditions that make it possible. This includes embedding knowledge of specialist provision into teacher training and ongoing development. All educators must be equipped to understand and meet diverse needs – not as an add-on, but as core professional practice. This shared expertise across the system supports both inclusion and excellence.





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